Tells the Facts and Names the Names

CounterPunch

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Easterbrook's Moment:

Dr. Pangloss Goes Corporate

Gregg Easterbrook's *A Moment on Earth: The Coming Age of Environmental Optimism*, wildly praised in polite circles, is a significant political document representing neoliberalism at full stretch. If Newt Gingrich is essentially a Benthamite liberal with a joy-through-technology posture of ineffable crudeness, Easterbrook is from the same mold, albeit at an infinitely greater level of sophistication. His approach is to allow "market forces" to allocate resources, supervised by the technocracy.

A useful example of the neoliberal approach is offered by the system of pollution credits, which came out of Sen. Ted Kennedy's office in the late 1970s. The idea was formulated by Stephen Breyer, now on the Supreme Court. Pollution credits, keenly hailed by Easterbrook, permit companies to pollute so long as they buy credits from a company in the same area which is, relatively speaking, *underpolluting*. Thus a power plant in, say, Wilmington, a poor district in Los Angeles, can poison school children in the neighborhood, but still be within its legal limits if it is located in the same zone as the firm from which it bought its credits.

The neoliberal regulator argues that the overall pollution remains the same, or can slowly be diminished by fiat. Nonetheless, at the poor end of town kids still breathe poison. "Such voluntary approaches to pollution control," writes Easterbrook, "are the wave of the future. Market innovation and non-legalistic mediation are infinitely preferable to judicial review and bureaucratic rule-making ... Pollution trading reduces the likelihood of horror stories."

Easterbrook's take on nature is that aside from nuclear war it is virtually invulnerable to the assaults of humans. So far as the western world is concerned, he regards us as in the midst of "the greatest ecological renewal the world has ever known". Thus, he sees most environmentalists as guilty of hyperbole in their alarums about the state of the planet.

Back in the polluting 1950s and 1960s, Easterbrook argues, environmentalists like Rachel Carson performed valuable tasks. But today the tide has turned, the earth is protected, corporations have seen the light and all is not only well, but continually improving. Thus, "Nature might consider the economies of the West as the ecologically sustainable ones."

Pursuing this intoxicated theme, Easterbrook claims that there are now more spotted owls in California than there were in pre-Columbian times, and that the true degraders were the hunter-gatherers. "Nature may love citizens of the Third World but is rooting for engineers of the First," he writes. The only solution: industrialize the Third World, under the benign supervision of the World Bank.

Particularly marked in Easterbrook's book is a chill elitism that expresses itself not only in contempt for grassroots environmental organizers, but also for the ranchers, loggers and mill workers who form the popular base of the Wise Use Movement, which he incorrectly describes as a minor fad. Easterbrook's heroes are the technocrats: economists, scientists and policy wonks who fuel such groups as the Environmental Defense Fund, which has made corporate greenwashing its own specialty.

Easterbrook carries technocratic meliorism to the level of rapture. "If cooperation, not competition, is the driving force of biology, then the warm and welcome premises of natural law and deism may turn out right after all. Perhaps nature is

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The Voice of Reason

"I would have no objection if we picked out a country that is a likely suspect and bombed some oil fields, refineries, bridges, highways, industrial complexes ... If it happens to be the wrong country, well, too bad, but it's likely it did something to deserve it anyway."

— Mike Royko seeking revenge on the "Arab terrorists" responsible for the Oklahoma bombing, *Chicago Tribune*, April 21, 1995

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Punch Bowl

Orgasm, Self-Abuse and U.S. Decline

The bombing in Oklahoma is receding now, and the commentators are running out of things to say. A piece by Thomas Edsall in the April 30 *Washington Post* traced the murderous anger of the alleged perpetrator, Timothy McVeigh, to the rise of the women's movement and the decline in status of the vaginal orgasm.

According to Edsall, men face dire employment prospects because of affirmative action, and are being laid off in numbers greater than women. Those who hold a job live in fear of being unfairly charged with sexual harassment. Hence, men have "a sense of private siege, voiced most often only in quiet tones at lunch or more angrily over beer after work".

But nowhere, Edsall writes, has the "seismic upheaval" in the U.S. been greater than in the area of sex: "In the year that Timothy McVeigh was born, the pill had just started to sever the linkage between intercourse and pregnancy ... The pill opened for women the same vista of sexual opportunism that had been available to men. At the same time, the 'myth of the vaginal orgasm' ... was replaced by the recognition of the clitoral orgasm, further freeing women seeking such autonomy from dependence on men for sexual satisfaction."

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Unemployed and listless, their women locked in the bedroom in a haze of solitary pleasure, American men of late-20th century America are frustrated. They seek relief in one of the few outlets still available: mixing fuel oil with fertilizer and blowing up federal buildings. Of course, you could argue it the other way and claim that the supposed fallen status of the vaginal orgasm has taken pressure *off* men, reduced their stress levels and hence their tendencies to detonate bombs.

At this level of silliness we can expect the organic farm movement to use the Oklahoma bombing as the springboard for a national campaign to ban all chemical fertilizer. This would not only improve the nation's soil and water, reduce the ag surplus and hence diminish the cost of federal crop supports, but would also boost the small farmers who would spend their days mulching instead of training with the local Patriot militia.

Footnote: Once upon a time Edsall was a decent reporter. His book on Reaganism, *The New Politics of Inequality*, wasn't bad at all. But Edsall seems to have realized that even the barest tincture of radicalism would doom his prospects for career advancement at the *Post* and in the wider journalistic industry of opinion-mongering in Washington. His mental decay is evinced in the mad propositions described above.

The Flying Banker

Though he will only formally take over at the World Bank in June, investment banker James Wolfensohn is already grumbling about the size of his compensation package — a mere $190,000 in salary with $95,000 thrown in for expenses. This does not inspire confidence in Wolfensohn's proclamations that he will hack without pity at excess spending and frills at the Bank.

The first order of business at the Bank has been the issue of the new president's transportation. For ten years Wolfensohn has led virtually an airborne life, with an office set up on his private jet. His desire is to maintain this arrangement, with expenses paid by the Bank.

It seems that Wolfensohn's wishes will be accommodated, with World Bank officials preparing to deflect criticism by demonstrating with airline schedules, net cost assessments and other tools of the budgeteer that keeping the private jet would be far more economical for the Bank than Wolfensohn's use of public transportation.

This is a far cry from the tenure of Robert McNamara, who as president of the World Bank insisted on travelling coach. Savings must have been meager, though, since Bank officials bought up the row of seats in front of McNamara so their boss had plenty of room to deploy his papers.

The Bank's board has now pushed through a $153 million program to implement a staff reduction plan that will cut payroll by about 1,000 people. That amounts to roughly $150,000 a head.

Costs are high because employees who are found "redundant" will receive, in addition to the Bank's already generous severance package, a bonus of five weeks salary for every year of service. Some top-level employees, including a number who lobbied ardently to be declared "redundant", even though they were nearing

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retirement or were already looking for other work, will walk away with more than half a million dollars.

If Wolfensohn were serious about cleaning up shop, he would fire most high-ranking Bank bureaucrats. We recently heard amusing reports of Javed Burki, Vice President for the Latin American and Caribbean Region, a bungler described to us as "Forrest Gump without the character".

Burki promoted the Mexican "economic miracle" relentlessly, right up until December 20, when that country's economy collapsed along with the peso. Miguel Rodriguez, a former Venezuelan planning minister who worked at the Bank between 1990 and 1993, tried to alert Burki and other Bank officials to warning signs in Mexico, but he was written off as a knock-kneed Jeremiah.

Burki was vacationing in Pakistan when the Mexican crisis erupted, and the crisis left him undisturbed. He continued his holidays, finally returning to Washington in early January. At that point the Bank was in crisis. Mexico was collapsing, and other Latin American nations seemed to be headed in the same direction.

Burki remained oblivious to the chaos. He had scheduled a junket to Bolivia for January, and was determined to preserve this relaxing itinerary, even though he would be staying in the highlands and beyond the reach of phone. By the time his superiors learned of his travel plans, Burki and his assistant were already in Miami awaiting their flight to La Paz. A top official finally reached Burki at the airport and ordered the crestfallen VP to return to Bank hq.

No Ifs, No Butts

Eager to get an inside perspective on political affairs in Washington, a group of students in Fairbanks, Alaska invited Rep. Don Young to speak about the GOP's "Contract With America". Young, head of the House Natural Resources Committee, expounded on a number of his favorite topics, including the need to slash federal funding of the arts.

The government, Young said, has funded "photographs of people doing offensive things" and "things that are absolutely ridiculous". The students asked Young what sort of pictures he had in mind. "Buttfucking", the congressman tersely replied. His reference was to a 1990 National Endowment for the Arts-funded exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs in Cincinnati.

Young, a former teacher, defended his remarks, saying he was merely "trying to educate" the inquisitive youngsters.

All the Whores

Our April 1 lobbyist round up reported that Herman Cohen, the Bush administration's assistant secretary of state for African affairs, had signed a deal to promote the good deeds and wise leadership of Gabon's president, El Hadj Omar Bongo. Image enhancement is certainly required, since Bongo's regime tortures and kills its opponents and the president retained office in a 1993 election only through fraud.

Now, Cohen, preparing Bongo's upcoming trip to the U.S., is confronted with a new p.r. problem. It seems that a number of Parisian prostitutes are suing Bongo's French tailor, who procured their services for the dictator without revealing that he is HIV-positive. Bongo refuses to discuss the case, saying that it is a private matter and that "it is public knowledge that many figures outside Gabon could be involved in comparable paracommercial practices".

Bongo paid up to $15,000 per night for his French prostitutes. Cohen also charges stiff fees for his services. He'll receive $300,000 this year from Gabon's dictator.

Check-Writing Syndrome

Another unlovely chapter in the life of the public interest movement has drawn to a close. On April 18, Nina Solarz pleaded guilty in federal court to several charges, including stealing $7,500 from a charity she headed. Three days later Solarz showed up at a an emergency executive board meeting of the non-profit Fund for Peace, a group she has headed since 1987, and begged to remain in charge of the organization.

Solarz confided that she was suffering from a serious medical ailment: chronic check-writing syndrome. The board of the Fund, a reputable organization prior to Solarz's tenure, remained unmoved. By an overwhelming vote, she was evicted from her $85,000-a-year job.

Solarz had been running the Fund into the ground for years. When her husband, Stephen Solarz, was in Congress, she regularly travelled by plane from Washington to New York at the Fund's expense. Upon her arrival Solarz would be met by a limousine, whisked off to a lunch engagement, and in the evening attend a political function with her husband. The following day she would return to the capital.

Incidentally, for many years Stephen Solarz sat on the board of the National Endowment for Democracy. During that period the NED was one of the Fund for Peace's most generous financial backers.

A former colleague recalls great excitement at the Fund when Nina Solarz was invited to appear on a morning news show to discuss a new project she was coordinating on China. But staffers were horrified when Solarz used most of her time on the program to complain bitterly that her luggage had been misplaced during a trip she had recently made to that country.

Solarz's selection to head the American Friends of Turkish Women — the group from which she stole $7,500 — was a political pay-off to her husband from the regime in Ankara, of which Stephen Solarz was an active promoter in Congress. Since the Turks couldn't legally pay the congressman for his services, Nina Solarz was put in charge of the Ankara-linked charity outfit.

Like his wife, Stephen Solarz is devoid of moral compass. Bounced out of Congress by voters in 1992 when it was found that he had written 743 bad checks on his House bank account over a three-year period — providing himself, effectively, with $576,000 in interest-free loans from taxpayers — Stephen Solarz is now a consultant in Washington. He visited Indonesia early this year and, according to the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, tried to peddle American and Russian weaponry to armed forces commander Gen. Feiusal Tanjung.

Solarz has fallen upon hard times since losing his House seat. When Clinton won the presidency there was talk of Solarz becoming secretary of state, ambassador to the U.N., or, at a minimum, ambassador to India. Such possibilities were eliminated when the FBI learned that Solarz had ties to Yeung Shau-Shing, a Hong Kong gangster. Clinton finally offered him the post of special envoy to Khartoum, an offer so humiliating that Solarz — a fanatical supporter of Israel and mortal enemy of Islamic Sudan — turned it down. ■

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(Easterbrook, continued from p. 1)

a moral realm, operating on principles that have implications for society ... Perhaps nature has family values."

Technology here becomes the moral agent. Easterbrook supports constructing gigantic space mirrors to turn darkness into a kind of perpetual half-light, dreams of Star Wars-type nuclear devices trained upon the heavens to destroy comets and asteroids, and envisages progress as the journey toward pure consciousness: "Movement of life toward the realm of consciousness would be a banner day for nature ... Once we have defined pure mental patterns as living consciousness, this means there may some day be something approximately like electronic life ... nonbiological life ... might exist with almost no ecological impact."

Alas, the electronic life represented by Easterbrook's labors on his word processor has scant relationship to the real world. The book is arrogantly ignorant and thickly infested with ludicrous errors.

Easterbrook's blunders are varied in genre. Many stem from haste or simple lack of knowledge. Thus he repeatedly refers to the marbled murrelet as the "murlet". He claims, incredibly, that a mere one percent, or even half that tiny total, of U.S. ancient forests have been damaged. Nearly the reverse is true: little more than five percent of the pre-Columbian forest remains intact.

He has a touching belief in the integrity of numbers issued by the extractive industries. Thus he asserts that time after time environmental clean-ups have cost "less than anticipated sums". Of course, corporations responded to proposed regulations with grotesquely inflated estimates of what they would have to spend on scrubbers, pollution controls and the like, then later reported exaggeratedly low costs in order to placate their shareholders.

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Real science is well beyond Easterbrook's ken and he accepts the premises and claims of the EPA, of industry and of environmental groups with equal alacrity. He says, for example, that "smog" in Los Angeles has declined by one-third. A concept as vague as "smog" is not susceptible of precise or meaningful measurement. There are measurable constituents of the atmosphere such as ozone, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, hydrocarbons, some of which are extremely toxic and some of which are not. Not all of these declined by a third. Some went up and some went down.

There is now a huge regulatory industry devoted to the monitoring of auto emissions. The catalytic converter, mistakenly pursuing ozone instead of oxides of nitrogen (whose main sources, such as power plants, tend to be owned by powerful lobbies), produces sulfuric acid, thus heightening the toxicity of urban atmospheres by increasing airborne sulfates which in turn react malignly with toxic metals in the atmosphere.

He hails the environmental movement for supposed triumphs (which he berates it for minimizing) that it had nothing to do with. The fact that Detroit was removed from the "smog" list has less to do with clean-up than with industrial flight. The return of forest to farmlands in, say, Vermont, owes nothing to the greens and everything to a collapsed farm economy. The creation of new toxic dumps has nearly stopped, Easterbrook exults, without reflecting that illegal dumping may controvert this silly claim.

Of 745 pages, Easterbrook devotes three paragraphs to the problem of environmental racism, concluding that "an incinerator or similar installation in a black or Hispanic neighborhood ought to be acceptable if the installation is safe and if white neighborhoods get their share, too." Of course, he doesn't suggest relocating old leaking landfills – 99 percent of which are located in poor neighborhoods – uptown.

Easterbrook dismisses dioxin as a natural compound related to table salt, nearly harmless. The largest study of dioxin and human health found a 46 percent increased hazard of cancer among workers whose exposure lasted at least a year and began at least 20 years ago.

Some of his assertions appear to have been reprinted directly from corporate hand-outs. He says that industry didn't really contribute to the decline of the spotted owl because industry owns mainly low-elevation forest and "Cascade spotted owls are often found at higher elevations." Thus, he avoids the point that the owls were long ago eliminated from their low-elevation habitat by liquidation of low-elevation forest by industry.

Many of these mistakes have been identified in earlier articles by Easterbrook, but here they are, on parade again as battle-scarred veterans. He quotes ecologist David Wilcove as saying that it "appears the [spotted] owl population is not in as bad of shape as imagined ten years ago, or even five years ago." When this quote appeared in an article Easterbrook wrote in *The New Republic* last year, Wilcove wrote a letter to the editor saying that Easterbrook had "omitted the second part of my comment ... All indications are that the owl is not surviving. I know of no competent scientist who would claim otherwise." Easterbrook has learned well the prime lesson of the huckster, concede nothing.

Easterbrook comes from that generation of neoliberals who got their start at *The Washington Monthly*. From James Fallows, to Nicholas Lemann to Gregg Easterbrook – scroll down the list of shame which has now produced one of the most malignly foolish books of the decade. ■

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